

On the one-year anniversary of Tropical Storm Irene, Vermonters unite to reflect on a year of resilience and rebuilding

[By Sally Pollak](#)

Lois Mearse sat in the back of Chandler Music Hall Tuesday night, surrounded by her sister and her daughter.

"We're victims," said Mearse, 64. "We're here to remember what happened that day."

The day was one year ago: Aug. 28, 2011, when flooding from Tropical Storm Irene devastated many places in Vermont.

Six lives were lost in the storm; thousands of acres of farmland were wrecked; homes were destroyed, roads and bridges washed away.

Mearse lived for 36 years in a blue house along the White River in Bethel. Her house was wrecked that day. But her family was safe.

"I got my family out and my pets out," Mearse said. "Everything else in it can be replaced. A house is a house. People in it make it a home."

It was this spirit of hope, strength and generosity that marked the commemoration Tuesday at the Chandler Center for the Arts, where events included an art exhibit, displays by groups involved in the recovery, and a program of music and speeches in the music hall.

Gov. Peter Shumlin led the group of public officials — including Vermont's Congressional delegation — who gathered in Randolph.

"I would assert that there is no natural disaster in the country that has seen a recovery like we have seen," Shumlin said. The effort is "rooted in the goodness and generosity" of Vermonters.

Despite the successes of the recovery effort, work remains to be done, the governor said. He described Vermont one year after the storm as "a tale of two states."

There are those who were not directly affected by Irene, and those who are its victims, Shumlin said. "We must re-charge our batteries and get back to work," he said.

Invoking the memory of the people who died in Tropical Storm Irene, Shumlin said: "We will not quit as a state until we get this state back in their memory."

Then the governor introduced Vermont's two senators and one Congressman, announcing: "It's unusual to be able to get the best Congressional delegation in America in the same place at the same time."

Sen. Patrick Leahy brought with him a copy of a photograph he took of a handwritten sign that said: "Thank you volunteers. You continue to give us hope."

He said he'd lost track of the number of times he's talked to President Obama about what Vermont needs to aid the recovery effort.

"The hope that we saw is what we want to show the rest of the country."

Sen. Bernie Sanders said the commemoration is a day for "looking back and remembering the

devastation." Most importantly, he said, it's day "to give thanks to the thousands and thousands of Vermonters" who helped in the recovery effort. He recalled being in Wilmington after the flood, and recognizing police officers from Burlington who had come to relieve and assist the exhausted local officials.

"If we stand together and if we focus," Sanders said, "we can in fact prevail."

Rep. Peter Welch talked about the storm's random path of destruction: "None of us know why that happened, why the storm decided to come to Vermont," Welch said. "But it did."

In its wake, he noted, Vermonters have shown their commitment to building community.

The program included a presentation from the Vermont Folklife Center, which collected flood stories from Vermonters, including gathering people in "story circles" to share their experiences.

Singer Jon Gailmor performed two songs, including one written for the Irene commemoration, "A Year Later." His lyrics included the lines: "We're a state to be reckoned with/next storm beware/for together we're here/and together we're one."

A moving portion of the program was the performance by members of the Vermont Youth Orchestra Association, which played two pieces: "Adagio for Strings" by Samuel Barber, and a choral work by Mozart.

Before the performance, as the musicians joined the crowd eating free Ben and Jerry's ice cream bars outside the hall (except for the singers, in deference to their vocal cords), members of the VYOA said it was an honor to be part of the commemoration.

"Today is to show that we remember what happened," said Sadie Citro, a cellist from Essex Junction. Her grandmother lives in Plymouth, Sadie said, and she watched a trailer float by her home the day of the storm.

"It's really a special thing to be part of," said vocalist Justin Winokur of Stowe. "I think it's great to show support for your community."

Before the program began in the musical hall, visitors looked at the art exhibit in the center's gallery.

Bill Baumann, a retired engineer from Randolph, said his hillside home was spared in the storm. But he's lived in Randolph since 1969, and he knows people and land that suffered significant damage from flooding.

"I hope it's a good sign of resurrection," he said of the commemoration. "People are slowly getting back to their way of life, and that's really gratifying to see."

His engineering expertise was called upon to help FEMA officials assess the extent of the damage to the village's water treatment plant, Baumann said.

One work in the exhibit was a painting by a 10-year-old Waterbury girl, identified as Willa Y. Her piece was paired with her comment on the storm that flooded her town: "For a while I thought Waterbury was a water-logged town even though we've cleaned up," Willa says. "I don't feel that way anymore but I feel the roots of the town will always be wet."

Another work on exhibit, by Steve Roberts of Johnson, was a photograph and accompanying text called "Peace, Irene."

It was a gift to Gov. Shumlin, one of two gifts of artwork to the governor at the Chandler.

In "Peace, Irene," Roberts wrote, in part: "Everybody lost something, if only their attachment to what is and isn't possible in their own backyard."

Outside the hall, the food vendors included American Flatbread, the original incarnation from Waitsfield. Founder and owner George Schenk, who started his business in 1985, recalled the flooding of his restaurant and property at Lareau Farm one year ago.

"Because people came out and helped us, it literally saved the business," Schenk said. "It was profound and humbling and absolutely critical for the recovery of our business."

The outpouring of support meant employees could get paid, pizza could get made, and the business could carry on, Schenk said.

Crucial support and assistance — including infrastructure rebuilding — came from the state as well, Schenk said.

"I think Irene showed our state government worked extremely well —compassionate, efficient, and well thought out," he said. "And it provided a kind of emotional cushion. You felt like you weren't alone."

Dave Rapaport, of the Irene Recovery Office, said the organization debated whether to mark the one-year anniversary, and ultimately decided it was important to do so.

"It seemed clear there was a yearning that many Vermonters feel for some way to commemorate it," Rapaport said. "Both for healing and as a way to draw attention to the continued need for volunteers and donations."